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Time

BOLIVIA

No Room for Compromise

"Bolivia was like a two-horse cart headed for a precipice before my November revolution," says Air Force General René Barrientos. One of the horses was ~~President Victor Paz Es-~~ ~~tensoro~~, "and we got rid of him in November. Now we are rid of the other."

That other horse was ~~Juan Lechín~~, 52, Paz's onetime Vice President and a longtime leftist union leader. In a surprise raid, Barrientos' police had picked him up in his home and packed him off to exile in Paraguay aboard an air force C-47. Lechín's crime, according to Barrientos, was masterminding a "Communist conspiracy" to overthrow the Bolivian government. "Bolivia was at the crossroads," cried Barrientos in a radio speech. "The choice was Communism or democracy."

Plots & Feathers. Barrientos offered little evidence of an impending revolt. But he had plenty of other reasons to get rid of Lechín. As boss of the country's 26,000 tin miners, the former Vice President had been doing his best to complete the destruction of Bolivia's economy by refusing to cooperate in a program to reform the country's nearly bankrupt Comibol tin-mining enterprise.

With Communists deeply rooted in the unions, Bolivian tin production has slipped 30% since the 1950s; annual losses run to \$6,000,000. Of the 26,000-man payroll, fully 7,000 are featherbedders. So severe is the crisis that the U.S., West Germany and the Inter-American Development Bank have cut off the third phase of a \$38 million mining-development program. Yet Le-

chín had discouraged every attempt to cut costs, either by reducing the work force or by modernizing the mines.

No sooner was Lechín out of the way last week than Barrientos announced a sweeping program to put Comibol on its feet. As a starter, the bullet-hard ~~air force general tossed all top union leaders out of office, called for new union elections within 40 days, and before the week was out, exiled 36 more Communist and leftist union bosses to Paraguay.~~ To make sure the orders would be enforced, he put the country under a state of siege and ordered a military draft of all Bolivians between the ages of 19 and 50.

"Down with the Boot." Predictably, Lechín's Bolivian Labor Confederation called a general strike that shut down the railroads, factories, textile mills and tin mines. In La Paz itself, 4,000 factory workers shouting, "Down with the military boot!" sacked and burned the office of the military's domestic airline before police rifle fire dispersed the mob, killing one rioter and wounding 19. The demonstrations went on for six days. Then the workers started trickling back to work, leaving only the miners still storming around.

Though Barrientos seems to have won the round, the fight is far from over. Lechín's miners, controlled for years by experienced Communists and far-leftist agitators, are well-armed and not likely to give up easily. At week's end, when Barrientos ventured into mining country, gunmen ambushed his motorcade, killing one security agent and taking four others hostage. It was the eighth attempt on his life, and he only narrowly managed to escape. Barrientos also faces challenges within his own military, where pressures are growing against his increasingly autocratic ways (TIME, May 21). But he made it clear to both sides last week that he did not intend to retreat. "There is no compromise," he cried, "with the junta—or with Barrientos."



LECHÍN IN PARAGUAY

Heave-ho for the other horse.